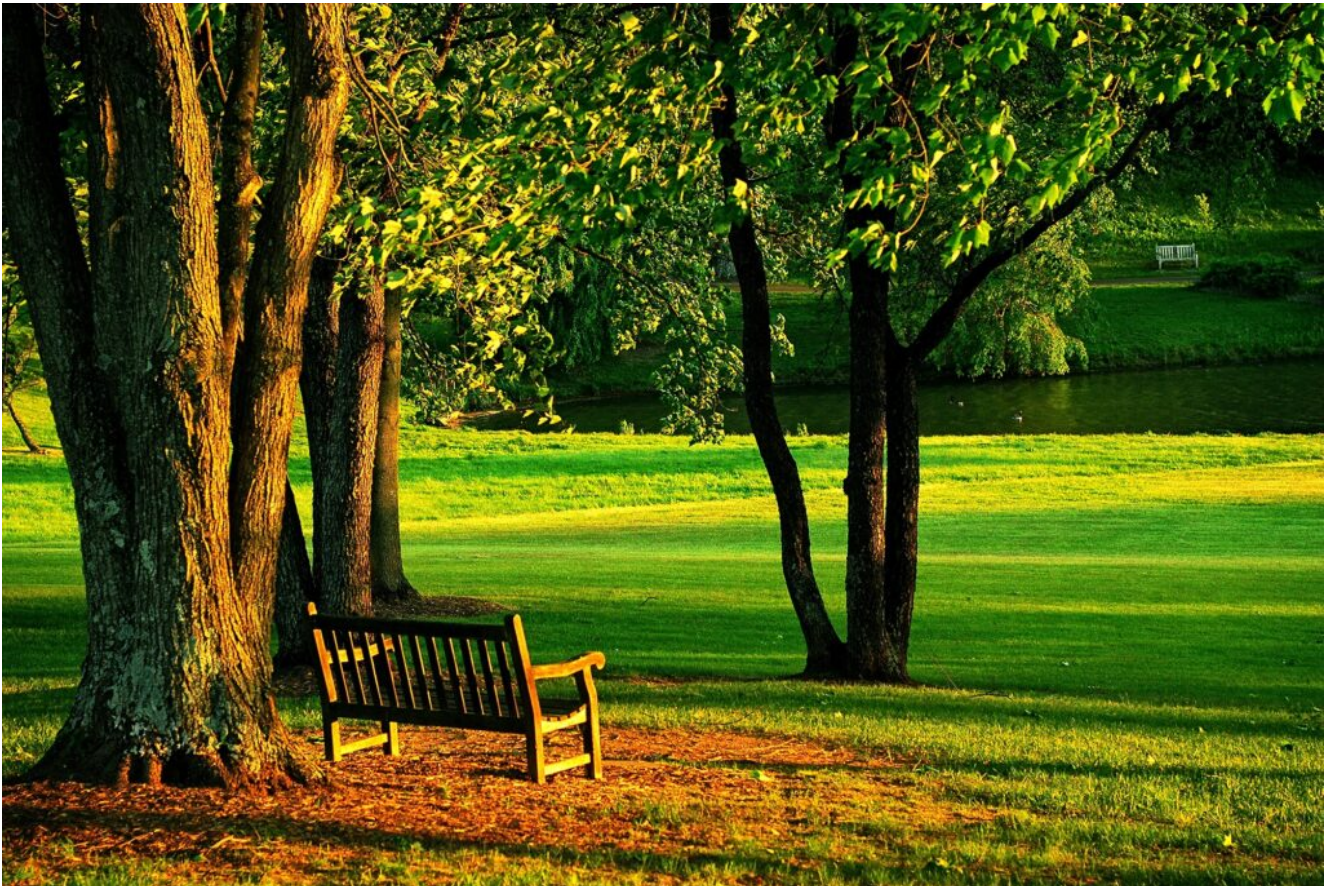


The benefits of urban green projects: A case study of the proposed Victoria Park in Gozo, Malta



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In recent decades, Gozo, an island in the Mediterranean Sea known for its tranquillity and traditional way of life, has experienced a gradual shift towards urbanization due to population growth and social changes. This transformation has converted rural areas into residential neighbourhoods, commercial zones, and modern infrastructure to accommodate the growing population. Given the rapid progress, the island faces several challenges. These include limited open spaces,

traffic congestion, and inadequate parking facilities.

In September 2020, the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) has been set up to formulate, streamline and help implement regional policies to ensure Gozo's sustainable development. One of the main roles of the Authority is to ensure that the 'development' of the region remains true to the long-term sustainable needs of Gozo, its inhabitants and all those that have Gozo's interests at heart. Acknowledging the current challenges, the GRDA has created a vision for Victoria, the island's capital city. The city of Victoria serves as the primary administrative and commercial centre of the island, and it is also home to some of Gozo's most popular historical and cultural heritage sites. The GRDA's vision for Victoria includes urban upgrading centred around establishing a green park in the existing parking area. Victoria's urban upgrading aims to rejuvenate the area and prioritize pedestrians and cyclists, promoting a vibrant public life while meeting social, environmental, political, and cultural objectives. Incorporating nature into daily life and creating public spaces is intended to foster a sense of community and improve the overall liveability of the region.

This Regional Insights article emphasises the potential positive outcomes of creating an urban green park, focusing on its social and environmental benefits and the expected economic and financial gains.

Proposed V. Park Concept

The proposed Victoria Park (V. Park) entails the green regeneration of Victoria's main car park area and its adjacent areas (for a detailed description of the proposed V. Park, see: Victoria's urban upgrade internet page). An open green space will be developed over an ecological multilevel underground car park that will be excavated to accommodate around 880 parking spaces over a total area of 22,000 sqm, spread over three floors.

Figure 1: Overview of the proposed V. Park



Source: GRDA.

The multi-level car park is envisaged to include the following technical specifications which would contribute towards green and smart mobility:

1. A green roof will cover it, trees and tree boxes, and rainwater harvesting systems to sustainably harvest and clean stormwater that would runoff into reservoirs. Alternative renewable energy, such as solar photovoltaic cells or kinetic floor tiles, might also be incorporated to achieve self-sustainability.
2. The parking lot shall host a high concentration of Electrical Vehicle (EV) recharging stations to encourage car owners to shift towards EVs.
3. Modern Internet of Things (IoT) technologies shall also be adopted to update users in real-time on parking availability.

Benefits of the Proposed V. Park

Health and Wellbeing Benefits

The primary goal of V. Park is to improve the health and well-being of residents, visitors, and Gozitans by creating more green open spaces in Victoria and reducing car usage on the streets. Adding substantial green areas is expected to

positively affect physical and mental health, including stress reduction, relaxation, increased physical activity, and enhanced social interaction. Accessible green spaces are also known to foster community cohesion. Studies have shown that people living in urban areas with abundant green spaces experience less mental distress, anxiety, and depression, leading to greater overall well-being than those in areas with limited green space. Assessing the health benefits can be done through willingness-to-pay studies. According to a recent study by Halkos et al. (2022), visitors were willing to pay an average of €3.56 for access to urban parks, highlighting the value people place on such spaces.

Environmental and Sustainability Benefits

As the main administrative hub, hosting schools and law courts, and being a popular tourist destination, Victoria faces numerous challenges such as traffic congestion, pollution, and other issues arising from the substantial influx of people for various purposes.

Currently, Victoria's primary car park area can only accommodate 225 vehicles. Due to the scarcity of parking spaces, cars are often parked on narrow roads, congested areas, squares, and locations near heritage sites, significantly impacting Victoria's urban fabric and the residents' and visitors' quality of life. Over the years, these challenges have worsened with the persistent increase in vehicles, while the available parking spaces in Victoria have remained unchanged. The proposed multi-level underground car park beneath the proposed green park aims to increase the parking capacity, thereby alleviating the parking shortage in Victoria and addressing the aforementioned challenges.

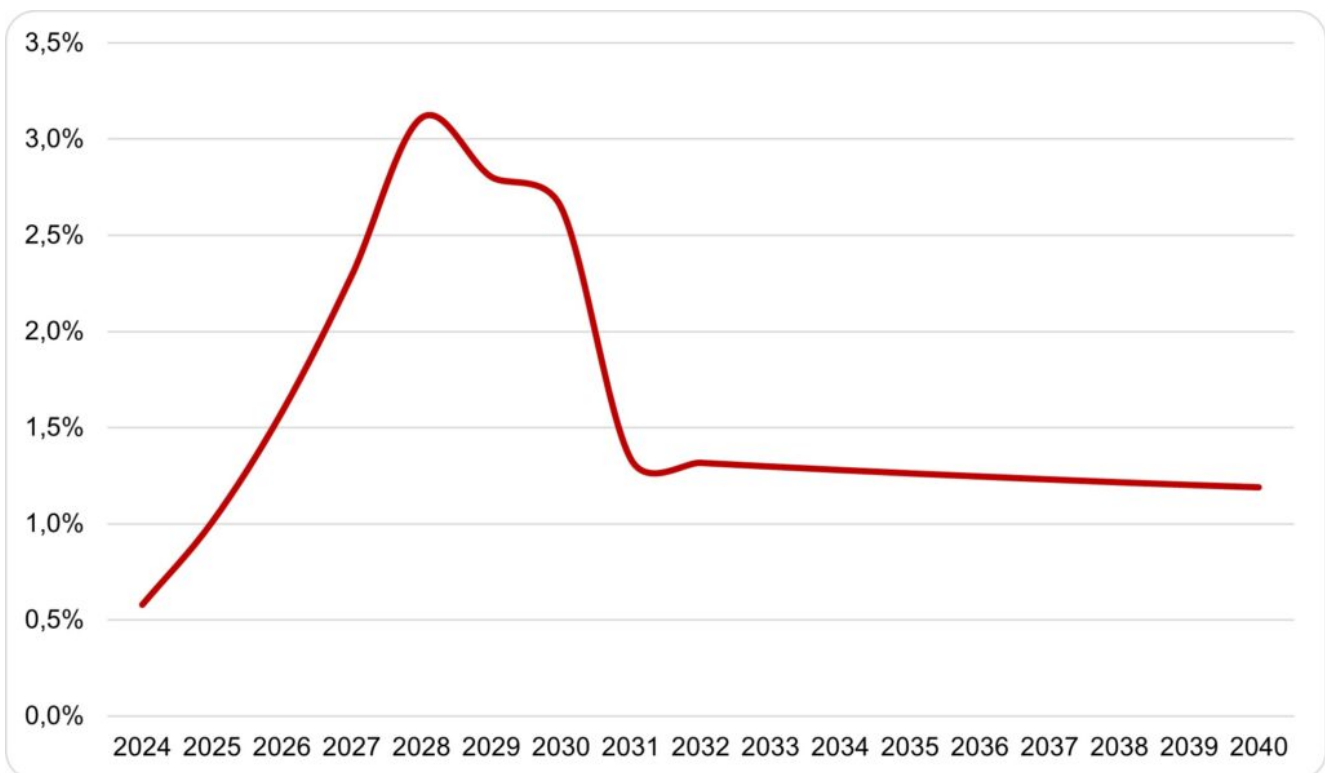
Furthermore, constructing a green multi-level underground car park intends to alleviate congestion in a highly congested area by removing bottlenecks while promoting sustainable mobility by providing electric vehicle charging stations, among other features. The bus terminus is also planned to be integrated into the underground car park, with the possibility of implementing a park-and-ride system for transporting passengers from Victoria to other areas in Gozo and facilitating transportation within the city centre. This will enhance traffic flow, tackle congestion and parking issues, and contribute to a cleaner environment by reducing car pollution and emissions in Gozo.

Economic benefits

The economic impact of the proposed V. Park is evaluated by comparing the changes in economic activity with the baseline economic forecast for Gozo. Based on this assessment, it is determined that the green park in Victoria, along with its associated parking facilities, will benefit the economy of Gozo. The project is expected to significantly increase economic activity in both the short and long term.

During the construction and finishing period, which is projected to span from 2024 to 2030, the annual real GDP of Gozo's economy is projected to, on average, increase by €13.0 million. This represents an average annual increase of 2.0% compared to the baseline projections provided by Oxford Economics (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Change in Real GDP (%)



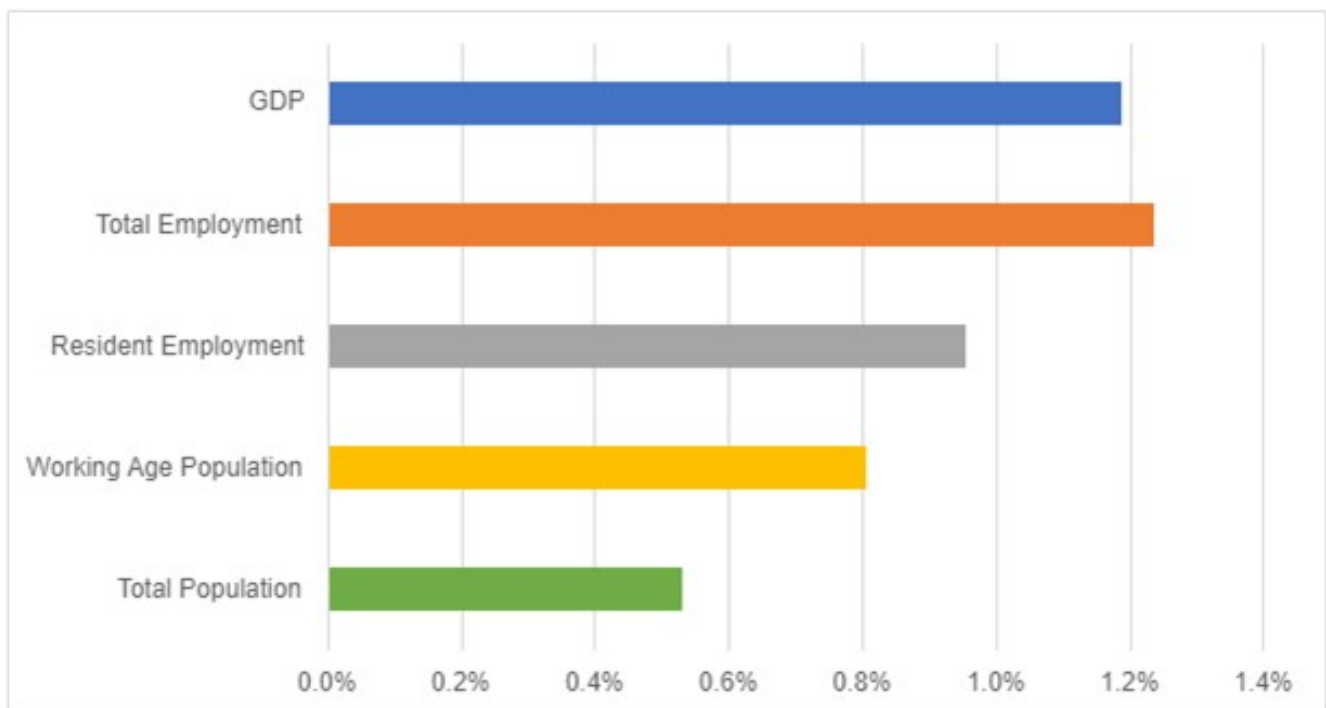
Source: GRDA estimates based on the Oxford Economics model.

Following the completion of the construction and finishing phase, the positive impact of V. Park on Gozo's economy is anticipated to continue. By 2040, the real GDP is predicted to be 1.2% higher than what was initially envisaged in the Oxford Economics baseline projections. This increase in real GDP is primarily

attributed to the heightened economic activity in the transportation and storage, arts and entertainment, and recreation sectors. Additionally, although to a lower extent, there will also be increased activity in public administration.

The increased economic activity resulting from V. Park will also positively impact employment rates. By the end of the projected period, the employment rate in Gozo is expected to be 1.2% higher than initially anticipated in the baseline projections (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Difference from baseline, 2040 (%)



Source: GRDA estimates based on the Oxford Economics model.

In terms of specific numbers, the new V. Park is estimated to generate an additional 225 workplace jobs by the end of 2040. This means that 225 more employment opportunities will be created compared to the baseline projections. The employment growth will primarily stem from the transportation and storage, arts and entertainment, and recreation sectors, which will experience increased activity due to the project. These sectors will play a significant role in driving job creation and contributing to the overall economic growth of Gozo.

Financial Benefits

The V. Park is anticipated to positively impact the area's appeal to investors, visitors, and prospective residents. Specifically, urban green open spaces are

valuable environmental assets often associated with beneficial effects on the overall quality of life and property values.

As previously mentioned, parks and green spaces have the potential to enhance healthy lifestyles and wellness for individuals of all ages, making them particularly attractive to families with children and retirees seeking a city that prioritizes a high quality of life. Well-maintained open spaces also offer an opportunity to create a positive impression and convey a sense of place and confidence, which can appeal to investors and businesses. Additionally, access to nature and open spaces tends to provide a sense of rejuvenation and enables workers to be more productive.

Public green spaces are frequently considered tools to reshape a city's image and revitalize neglected properties for market re-entry. Numerous studies indicate a significant correlation between property value and proximity to parks and open green spaces. Trojanek et al. (2018), conducted in Warsaw, Poland, examined the effect of urban green areas within a 100-meter radius of residential dwellings on property prices. The study revealed that, on average, such green spaces increased property prices by 2.8% to 3.1%, with a more substantial impact observed in modern residential buildings.

Concluding remarks

Despite maintaining its charm, Victoria is currently facing daily challenges. In response, the GRDA has taken the initiative to tackle these issues as it aims to draw a long-term sustainable master plan for the city of Victoria. One main component of this plan is the proposed V. Park, which offers numerous benefits and opportunities for the community, the economy and the environment. This proposal is just one element of the GRDA's broader mission to revitalize Victoria and bring lasting benefits to its residents, businesses, and tourists. By integrating the Victoria master plan with the Regional Development Strategy for Gozo, various pressing needs will be addressed, offering a holistic vision for Victoria's future and creating a platform for further opportunities in both Victoria and Gozo.

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